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TAGS: PTER PINS PGOV PK

SUBJECT: BLAST IN DERA GHAZI KHAN LINKED TO SECTARIAN CONFLICT

CLASSIFIED BY: Bryan Hunt, Principal Officer, U.S. Consulate Lahore, U.S. Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) An alleged suicide attacker killed 33 people in the southwestern Punjab district of Dera Ghazi Khan February 5. According to press and consulate contacts, the blast targeted a Shia procession converging on the imambargah, or house of worship, in the middle of Dera Ghazi Khan city. "It is a terrorist attack aimed at Shias to create unrest," Inspector General of Punjab Police Shaukat Javed told the Daily Times.

¶2. (C) Additional Secretary for Internal Security Usman Anwar told Poleconoff February 6 that government officials would meet in Dera Ghazi Khan to determine the nature of the blast since no group had yet taken credit for the attack. He noted that observers had at first claimed that the October 6, 2008 blast in Bhakkar District, just north of Dera Ghazi Khan, had sectarian underpinnings, but that a later investigation confirmed a political vendetta lay behind the Bhakkar blast. The Home Secretary and others would discuss the incident in Dera Ghazi Khan later on February 6, he said.

¶3. (C) Uzman Buzdar, the nazim (elected representative) of the Tribal Areas Tehsil in the District, told FSNOFF that he doubts the incident has a sectarian purpose. Buzdar noted that most victims of the explosion came from the Wadany, a "fierce" sub-tribe of the Khosas, whose many business dealings throughout the city have provoked resentment.

¶4. (C) Comment: The incident in Dera Ghazi Khan has all the markings of an attack by Sipah-e-Sahaba or Lashkar-e-Taiba, terrorist groups that have hit Shia processions in the past. The hesitation to attribute the attack to sectarian conflict could reflect an attempt to avoid tit-for-tat attacks and retribution. While Shia leaders have indicated that they will avoid retaliation, the incident provides an opportunity for violent outliers to ramp up recruitment, increase activity, and seek funds from supporters in Iran. The big mainstream leaders, however, intend to maintain a moderate stance and ally themselves with similarly minded Sufi/Barelvi (Sunni) groups.

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